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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA 5671
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING 3389
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 3253
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL 3914
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RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 001170

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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: FM MEREDOV BEING MARGINALIZED?

Classified By: Charge Sylvia Reed Curran for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S) SUMMARY: Changes in Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov's behavior and interactions with other members of the Cabinet of Ministers seem to indicate that he does not currently hold the first among equals position that he held even as late as early this year, and has been replaced as the "dean" of the Cabinet of Ministers. According to longtime Embassy contact Michael Wilson, Meredov has been marginalized somewhat because of his attempts to dissuade President Berdimuhamedov from making an announcement criticizing Russia following the pipeline explosion. In addition, Berdimuhamedov did not appreciate Meredov's efforts to smooth relations with Russia after the announcement, either. Some in the government do not trust Meredov on Azerbaijan issues, simply because Meredov's mother was ethnic Azeri. As Berdimuhamedov has moved away from Meredov, he has made more decisions without consulting others. He has also been taking more advice from the security services or former Niyazov advisors than he did in the past. If Meredov is being marginalized, this is not good for U.S.-Turkmenistan relations. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Since President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov's ascendency to power following the death of former President Niyazov in December 2006, Deputy Chairman and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov has played a special role. Berdimuhamedov seemed to rely greatly on Meredov and that reliance was not limited to strictly foreign affairs. It was clear to observers that he was indeed "first among equals." Early in his tenure, during meetings with foreign visitors, Berdimuhamedov would turn to Meredov when there was a question. In addition, Meredov seemed to play almost a prime-ministerial role. When with the other deputy chairmen, they often deferred to him. He was first in the line-up of deputy chairmen at any official event. During openings of exhibitions, he led the group of officials, diplomats, and visitors during tours of the exhibits. He was never far from the President. When other deputy chairmen traveled by plane on the president's trips to the provinces, Meredov would fly in the presidential helicopter with his boss.

¶3. (S) Something appears to have changed. Several months ago, MFA officials hinted that their boss was having problems. During recent events, Meredov has stood far back in the pack. During the ceremony September 13 for participants in the Silk Road 2009 Motor Rally, which Kazakhstan President Nazarbayev, Russian President Medvedev,

and Berdimuhamedov attended, Meredov stayed off to the side. At the conclusion of the ceremony, the Presidents headed off together, followed by the Cabinet of Ministers, other Turkmen officials, official visitors, Russian and Kazakh embassy representatives, and various hangers on. Trailing far behind the group was Meredov, walking and talking to a female Russian official. In fact, an Embassy FSN said that Meredov has been replaced as the "Dean" of the Cabinet of Ministers by Deputy Chairman for Health and Education Hydyr Saparliyev.

(COMMENT: This tracks with recent behavior of the deputy chairmen. Saparliyev has been at the head of the line of deputy chairmen during recent official events. He has also seemed more confident than usual. END COMMENT.)

14. (S) We met with EU-TACIS Representative Michael Wilson (strictly protect) September 14 to get his view. Wilson is a longtime Embassy contact, who has lived and worked in Turkmenistan since the early 90s. He has an extensive network of contacts in the government and always has his finger on the pulse of what is happening. Wilson said that Berdimuhamedov's dependence on Meredov has been waning since April, and the president does not trust Meredov's judgment as much as he did in the past. Wilson said one reason Meredov has been under pressure is because he tried to persuade Berdimuhamedov to not make the announcement condemning Russia for the pipeline explosion. Meredov worked hard when the dispute started to try to calm things with Russia and mitigate the negative effects of the outburst. However, Meredov's efforts were not appreciated by the president. Another reason for his problems is because Meredov's mother was ethnic Azeri. Therefore, despite all evidence to the

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contrary, there are some doubts that he might have divided loyalties.

15. (S) Currently, Meredov is more out of the loop on decisions than he had been before, said Wilson. However, Wilson asserted, Berdimuhamedov is increasingly making decisions without consulting with deputy chairmen. The tight knit group of advisors that surrounded Niyazov (Victor Khramov, Alexander Zhadan, and Vladimir Umnov - Wilson referred to them as the "thornbush") are the people most closely advising Berdimuhamedov now. In addition, Wilson said, Berdimuhamedov is listening more to the security services and the Ministry of National Security is having more influence all around.

16. (S) Wilson did not believe that Meredov would lose his job. Berdimuhamedov knows Meredov is the best lawyer in the country and that he needs this Foreign Minister for international legal advice. Wilson offered that Berdimuhamedov will keep Meredov, but keep him somewhat marginalized.

17. (S) COMMENT: Wilson's assessment tracks with what we had already noticed. Meredov (and MFA) was increasingly less willing to insert himself in problems involving other ministries. And concerns about security appear to be playing a major role in the student exit problem. If Meredov is being marginalized, this is not good news for the United States. Meredov is one of the smartest people in the Turkmen leadership and well-versed in all things American, including the U.S. Constitution. He is not a democrat, but he understands the importance of close relations and cooperation with the United States - certainly more than the new purported dean - Saparliyev. END COMMENT.

CURRAN